Chapter 5

FRIENDSHIP AND MAN'S REPUTATION: A CASE OF *ODDS ÞÁTTR ÓFEIGSSONAR*[1]

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THERE IS NO doubt that in medieval Scandinavian society reputation was a primary consideration. It often served as the motivator for blood feuds, complicated lawsuits, and extended negotiations. The honour of the people and the family was to be protected at all costs, and we can trace many interesting examples in the course of reading the old Icelandic sagas. Those vendettas and judicial battles in defence of honour could be explained by, among other things, exceptionally strong bonds between family members, loyalty, and the firm belief that one could not survive outside the supporting clan. These obligations were often extended to foster-children and close friends.

There were two main types of friendship in medieval Scandinavia. Helgi Þorláksson distinguishes emotional friendship—a relationship principally based on affection—and pragmatic, mutually beneficial, friendship. The first kind of connection was unconditional and durable, lasting in spite of adversity. The latter was in need of constant renewal by reciprocal gift-giving or feasts, and could be terminated if it was no longer beneficial.[2] Jón Viðar Sigurðsson uses different terms of reference to distinguish between relationships based on friendship in vertical (superior-subordinate connection) and horizontal relations (between equals).[3]

In this chapter I discuss the idea of friendship and the value of a man's reputation. The case study is based on one of the *þættir* preserved in the *Morkinskinna*, the oldest collection of the kings' sagas. The tale is called *Odds þáttr Ófeigssonar* and it is a story of an Icelandic merchant, Oddr Ófeigsson.

The text contained in the *Morkinskinna* is partially unreadable. Missing fragments are usually supplied on the basis of the younger manuscript, *Flateyjarbók*. Placed in the saga of King Haraldr immediately after *Stúfs þáttr* and not far from *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*, this story creates a counterweight to descriptions of naval battles and sublime poems of the court skalds, *ipso facto* preceding the series of stories of the invincible Icelanders. There are no female characters in the *Odds þáttr*, hence the focus on male friendship and reputation.

Although the matter of the generic identity of *þættir* (sing. *þáttr*) is still debatable, for reasons of clarity and in order to prevent ambiguities I use the term *þáttr* to mean "short narrative in medieval Icelandic prose."[4] I am aware of the fact that this short

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2 Helgi Þorláksson, *Friends, Patrons*, 293.

3 Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, "The Changing Role of Friendship in Iceland," 43–64.

4 See also Ashman Rowe and Harris, "Short Prose Narrative (þáttr)," 462.

definition does not reflect the complexity of the phenomenon, but this is not the object of this study.

Friendship is a common theme in *þættir* about Icelanders. The stories illustrate an ancient rule given—according to tradition—by Óðinn himself:

> To his friend
> a man should be a friend,
> and gifts with gifts requite.
> Laughter with laughter
> Men should receive,
> but leasing with lying.[5]

Friendship is essential for survival in the harsh reality of the Viking Age. Joseph Harris argues that in many tales "the hero's survival depends entirely on the intervention of his friends" and agrees that friendship is "a practical reciprocal arrangement," giving examples of *Gull-Ásu-Þórðar þáttr*, *Þorsteins þáttr Síðu-Hallssonar* and *Steins þáttr*.[6] However, he does not include *Odds þáttr* in this group, as it "for various reasons def[ies] assignment to one of the interpretative categories"[7] he uses in his analysis.

The plot of *Odds þáttr* is well-structured and subversive. The main protagonist, Oddr, is a reputable merchant. On one of his voyages abroad, his ship accidentally ends up in Finnmark (northern Norway), where Odd's crew start illegal trade. On their way south, as they sail past the island of Tjøtta, the Norwegian king Haraldr harðráði and his tax collector Einarr fluga catch them and demand an account of their ventures. Oddr, being aware of illegal trade which took place behind his back in Finnmark, attempts to save his crew from the ruler's anger. He advises his men to conceal the goods. Despite multiple searches of their cargo, Oddr's crew succeed in escaping detection with the help of one of King Haraldr's retainers, Þorsteinn, who is also a good friend of Oddr and a relative of the famous rebel and chieftain, Þórir hundr. Oddr and his men in Iceland unharmed. As a token of gratitude, Oddr sends some horses to Þorsteinn—which, ironically, proves to be a disservice to him. The Norwegian king hears of this gift and concludes from it that Oddr was dishonest and Þorsteinn disloyal, ordering the latter to be put to death. However, due to Þorsteinn's popularity and at King Haraldr's court, as well as absence of concrete evidence against him, the killing order is not carried out. Þorsteinn must take his leave of the court, parting with the king in hostility.

The main protagonist of *Odds þáttr* appears also in other sources, featuring as one of the heroes of *Bandamannasaga*. Although these two texts do not share the same storyline, both mention that Oddr was a successful merchant and in both cases the protagonist appears quite shortsighted in his actions, yet genuinely caring for the well-being of his subordinates. He is recurrently escaping trouble owing to advice from his friends and family. Oddr is prone to getting into conflicts: he finds himself

5 *The Poetic Edda*, 62.

6 Harris, "Theme and Genre," 7.

7 Harris, "Theme and Genre," 16.

in two legal trials in Iceland, the first against Óspakr for his lands and *goðorð*,[8] the second against the eight *goðar*—chieftains—who had joined Óspakr.[9] These legal disputes, however, were not provoked by Oddr himself, neither by his actions nor his ill will towards anyone. Instead, they were prompted by jealousies of his land, his influence, and his wealth gained through trade. In this context, *Odds þáttr* is a variation on a theme of the story of the *Bandamannasaga*: the tale of a man who came to wealth through hard work, yet attracting trouble due to false friends. The dispute with the king described in the *þáttr*, resulting in the collapse of the merchant's relationship with Norwegian court, had its origin in dishonesty of Oddr's crew, whom he felt obliged to protect.

Þorsteinn, Oddr's friend and ally at King Haraldr's court, plays the role of mediator in this story. He tries to protect his friend, ameliorating the king's anger while at the same time deflecting harm from himself. The *þáttr* introduces this character using his relationship with Þórir hundr, one of the greatest Norwegian chieftains, an opponent of King Óláfr II (later Saint King Óláfr), and, according to Snorri Sturluson in *Heimskringla*,[10] the king's assassin.[11] The combination of these two characters juxtaposes Þorsteinn to the oppressive power of the king.

Haraldr harðráði, the harsh ruler of Norway, is the most intriguing character in this *þáttr*. What a reader encounters in this text is no mere face-off between a cruel king, a resilient Icelander who cares for his own interests, but a complex network of emotions and motivations woven into the narrative itself, which stands out quite independently of its historical and literary context.When the royal tax collector Einarr reports on Oddr's actions, king Haraldr vents his anger and regret on the Icelander, accusing him of disloyalty. The *þáttr* relates:

> But the king answered little and rather angrily and said that Oddr treated him badly, while he always welcomed him with honor, and now he traded with the Lapps without permission.[12]

It may be seen from this statement that relationship between Oddr and Haraldr has previously been more than just proper. Oddr frequented the Norwegian court before, and was graciously received by the king. Staying on good terms with the Norwegian ruler was a priority certainly not overestimated in Oddr's merchant activities. As the narrative

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8 *Goðorð*—office of the "goði."

9 Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, 230–31, 309.

10 *Heimskringla*, 456.

11 Earlier sources do not confirm that it was Þórir hundr who struck a deadly blow: Theodoric the Monk writes about 1180 in *Historia Norvegiae* that it is not clear whether Óláfr got one or more wounds and what kind of wounds they should have been. However, already in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the official version of the description of the death of the holy king became well-founded: he was to die from three wounds: an axe in the thigh, a sword in the neck and a spear in the body.

12 *Morkinskinna. The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of Norwegian Kings*, 259.

suggests, the merchant himself did not break the royal ban on trade; his fault resided solely in shielding his subordinates. Similarly, following Oddr's conversation with Einarr, we can conclude that their earlier relations were positive, although Oddr knew about the darker side of Einarr's character; he once mentions Einarr having a reputation of not being very lenient. It is intriguing that Einarr lays his suspicions on his people and not on Oddr himself: "You know what is fitting, Oddr, but you have been among the Lapps this winter, and it may be that some of your men have not been so circumspect in dealing with the Lapps."[13] There is a suggestion here that Oddr himself is not suspected of breaking the law, probably due to his reputation of an honest merchant, which he managed to earn during some earlier expeditions. This sentence also contains the instigation to denounce the dishonest crew members to protect his own interests, but Oddr is not willing to do so.

At a later point, Oddr admits to his friend about not trading in Finnmark himself, but as his crew has done it he feels obliged to protect them. He confesses that his crew is hiding the forbidden goods on the ship. His only "charge" is to protect the crew who committed a breach of the royal ban. In this way, the charge changes into merit—because Oddr cares for his subordinates, putting their well-being over his own good relations with the king and thus losing all chances of trading with Norway in the future. His loyalty to his crew wins over his so-called friendship with the king.

Odds þáttr's technique of presenting its characters is worthy of particular consideration. The audience becomes acquainted with the protagonists solely through their own actions and words, without any comments from the narrator. The protagonists' portraits are complex and reliable, their motivations concrete and their problems relatable. Yet their presentation is not altogether objective. Through skilful narrative devices, the reader is inclined to identify and sympathize with Oddr, who actually does break the law, rather than with Haraldr, who is a *de facto* victim. The *þáttr* equips its characters with distinct personalities that enliven and colour them. They are not, as in many other narratives of this kind, typical or even conventional. With their fallible imperfections, they are made the more human and are thus brought closer to the reader.

The narrative use of language reveals the characters' negative emotions. When Einarr finds out that Oddr had tricked him during the search of the ship, he breaks out in anger and calls him "wretch"[14] ("allra manna armastr").[15] From this moment Einarr is confident that Oddr and his crew are hiding something from him. The initially calm and neutral narrative picks up speed as Einarr conveys a message to the king, presaging a sinister encounter that Oddr fears most: facing the wrath of Haraldr harðráði.

Haraldr, being informed of the incident between Einarr fluga and the merchant, is determined to discover the deceit and punish the guilty. He is very angry, taking the

13 *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of Norwegian Kings*, 258.

14 *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of Norwegian Kings*, 258.

15 *Morkinskinna*, 294

affront of his representative as a personal offence. The narrator emphasizes the king was "reiðr" (wrathful and offended). Anger and resentment imply further negative reactions of the king. "The king didn't wait for niceties but went to meet them,"[16] also without deliberating he goes to meet Oddr, who kindly welcomes him. However, Haraldr remains tight-lipped and rather angry. The Icelander responds calmly and politely to the king, but it does not soothe the king's anger. Although Haraldr has no evidence of Oddr's crime yet, he is convinced of his suspicion and declares that Oddr and his crew deserve to be "strung up and hanged on the highest tree."[17]

The narrative description of Þorsteinn is likewise noteworthy: he is presented as a handsome young man, a relative of one of the chieftains from a previous generation, and a good friend of Oddr. This description contrasts with the sinister attitude of the king. Male beauty in sagas is often combined with other positive qualities and attributed to heroes on the "good" side.[18] When Þorsteinn stays on his friend's ship in order to give him advice, he also helps him break the law and deceive the king. Due to stylistic approach of combining opposites, the reader automatically favours Oddr and Þorsteinn—the "beautiful and young" men in opposition to the "bad and suspicious" Haraldr and Einarr, although the latter are legally justified in their reactions, while the former are in the wrong. The unfavourable characteristics of the king are fulfilled by the narrator's words that he was so angry that he did not listen. Here is a clear contrast between Oddr's calm and balanced statements and a fierce response of the king, despite the lack of evidence of his reason.

When it turns out that Oddr escaped the royal jurisdiction, Haraldr's anger switches on Þorsteinn. He accuses his retainer of a "family tendency to betrayal," referring to Þórir hundr's earlier revolt against royal authority. Heated words are once more contrasted with a calm answer supplied by Þorsteinn, quietly explaining that stopping a king from killing an innocent man was not a betrayal, but an act of loyalty. Haraldr is described by means of negatively marked expressions which reveal his anger and wrath. The king's intellectual inferiority is underlined by the fact that he never has the last word and is still one step behind Oddr and Þorsteinn.

As Lars Lönnroth argues in *Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas*, the narrative techniques used in Old Norse prose only appear objective on the surface. In fact, they skilfully control the sympathies and antipathies of the audience, discreetly manipulating their feelings in relation to characters and events. Lönnroth divides those techniques in three categories: commentary, stylistic variation, and staging.[19] "Commentary" include all directly or indirectly expressed opinions. "Stylistic variation" is a tool consisting of a differentiation of language depending on whether the narrative concerns the positive or negative characters. "Staging" is both a narrative technique used to dramatize the important events and the selective process which determines what to tell and in what order. As

16 *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of Norwegian Kings*, 259.

17 *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of Norwegian Kings*, 259.

18 Lönnroth, "Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas," 87.

19 Lönnroth, "Rhetorical Persuasion in the Sagas," 104.

we can see from this case study, the narrative of *Odds þáttr* is clearly differentiating the characters and by appropriate stylistic means, giving them positive or negative features.

In medieval Scandinavian society, reputation was one of the most important values and a way to maintain high social standing. It could either help or hinder in achieving desired goals. Honour and prestige were not only matters of the person involved but also represented power and standing of people related to individual in question.[20] "The fair fame," praised in the ancient poem *Hávamál*, is present in almost all Old Norse texts:

> Cattle die,
> Kindred die,
> We ourselves also die;
> But the fair fame
> Never dies
> of him who has earned it.[21]

There are various ways to achieve immortality in human memory. One of them is the poetry giving the praised person what every skald, warrior and ruler wishes most: the possibility of writing his name in the pages of history. But the "fair fame" does not have to refer to the lofty ideas of heroes only. Equally, merchants, farmers, and everyday adventurers cared for their good reputation and the honour of their family and friends.

The protagonists in *Odds þáttr* could make use of public opinion: Oddr is known as a successful merchant, wise and acquainted with rules of law. He has been a recurring guest at the king's court, always welcomed—until the events described. The good fame of Þorsteinn literally saves his life. When the king wants to kill him, his retainers refuse to fulfill the order. But it is his family reputation which triggers the king to suspect him of treason: as mentioned above, Þorsteinn is related to King Óláfr's reputed slayer.

Icelandic–Norwegian political relations have often been described in literature as complicated.[22] The hostile attitude of the Norwegian court towards Icelanders and vice versa, evidenced from many Old Norse texts, stems from ancient conflicts that began with Haraldr hárfagri attempts to unite Norway, often at the free farmers' expense. Magnús Fjalldal describes this account as "love-hateful":

> Much of the time, medieval Icelandic writers loathed the court of Norway. They knew the Norwegian kings had schemes to gain control over the country (which they eventually did in 1262), and they also knew the Norwegian court was actively supporting certain players in what was virtually a civil war in Iceland during the first half of the thirteenth century. […] But thirteenth-century Icelandic writers also knew that if you wanted to be socially acceptable, kings and their courts were your key to success.[23]

20 Byock, "Choices of Honor," 174.

21 *The Poetic Edda*, 68.

22 See, for example, Sverrir Jakobsson, "The Early Kings of Norway," 171–88

23 Fjalldal, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 101.

The "friendship" between these countries and their citizens was of the pragmatic-political type, based on mutual benefits as an arrangement to achieve political goals. It was a hierarchical relationship, with Norway acting as superior. *Odds þáttr* emphasizes the ambivalence of relations with the Norwegian court. Oddr faces a powerful adversary, and despite displays of courtesy he stands up to protect his people. Meanwhile Þorsteinn is one of the royal retainers, despite his family's opposition to the throne. He is both respected and popular, yet draws the king's accusation for being "true to [his] family with respect to treachery."[24] The narrative makes clear that Þorsteinn puts more value in his friendship with the Icelander Oddr, based on common experiences and on trust, rather than his friendship with the king, which mainly rests on mutual benefits.

Unlike some other *þættir* of *Morkinskinna,* the purpose of this narrative is no mere affirmation of certain moral values, and no mere entertainment. Absent here are the motifs of loyal service, or of striving to maintain best possible relations with the king, as is the case in many other *þættir*. The main thread in this narrative is an Icelandic merchant's resistance (not a skald, not a warrior, but an average man) against the ruler and his way of ruling. In the end, Oddr effectively slips away from the king's power and manages to fool him—with Þorsteinn's help.

The friendship between Oddr and Þorsteinn brings to mind the ideal of "noble friendship," containing the element of selflessness and sacrifice, originating in antiquity and featuring in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. He defines friendship as a concept that "is either virtue or involves virtue."[25] It is reckoned as superior to friendship within family. Later, Cicero re-establishes it as a central topic of discourse through *De amicitia*, but in Roman culture the meaning of the term *amicitia* was closer to "alliance" than "friendship" in modern understanding of these terms. It encompassed relationships of more political than private nature, both between equals and patrons; subordinates required reciprocal obligations.[26] The disturbance of this delicate balance could be a death blow for such relations. Cicero notes: "Yet tyrants are flattered with a false show of friendship as long as they can be made of use; but if, as often happens, they are overthrown, their lack of true friends is at once manifest."[27]

In Old Norse literature, this pragmatic category of friendship is easily found. The presently discussed narrative of *Odds þáttr* constitutes a clear illustration of Cicero's quote: as long as the king of Norway could use the friendship of Oddr and Þorsteinn for his own needs, both were considered his good "friends." But the moment he began to suspect them of undermining his position and acting to his detriment, his "friendship" at once turns into fierce hostility.

Not many centuries after Cicero's *De amicitia*, theologian and philosopher Augustine of Hippo transformed the idea of noble friendship into a lasting friendship which may only come in and through Christ. Some decades later, Boethius in *Consolation of*

24 *Morkinskinna: The Earliest Icelandic Chronicle of Norwegian Kings*, 260.

25 Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship*, 6.

26 Viðar Pálsson, *Power and Political Communication*, 5.

27 Marcus Tullius Cicero, *De amicitia*, 82.

philosophy stated that noble friendship is unalloyed, and that misfortune may help discover who one's true friend really is.[28]

The idea of noble friendship is recurrent in medieval romances, like *The Song of Roland* or *Yvain*. Warrior companions and friends appear in early Germanic epic, such as *Beowulf*, and in the saga literature, for example *Njáls saga*. The ideal of two men bound to each other, appreciating each other's qualities, was a popular one. As close confidants, they find mutual refuge in each other; they are allies and counsellors in adversity, willing to die on each other's behalf. Yet what is central in the Old Nordic cultural ideal of a long-lasting friendship is sharing and reciprocal gift-giving, as emphasized in *Hávamál*.[29]

Odds þáttr touches the problem of ethics in the "friend-to-friend" and "subject-to-king" relations. The first dynamic is posited as exalted, noble, and lasting despite the difficulties and dangers; the second is presented as secondary, easy to end, without affecting anyone's feelings. Deceiving a king in order to help a friend is not only admissible but even glorious, this *þáttr* suggests. Guðrún Nordal[30] distinguished loyalty to family members as a characteristic feature of pagan and early Christian societies of Iceland. In *Odds þáttr*, strong bonds of loyalty also apply to close friends. The reader observes, for instance, Þorsteinn's attempts to save Oddr from Haraldr's punishment, as well as the defence put on by members of Haraldr's retinue to shield Þorsteinn from royal wrath when the king orders him slain.

The ideal of noble friendship is also described in some sagas of Icelanders: *Egils saga* tells of the close relations between Egill and Arinbjörn, and *Njáls saga* is famous for depicting the friendship of Njáll and Gunnarr. In both cases one friend risks his health and life to help the other. Oddr and Þorsteinn thus emerge as part of this tradition.

As may be observed, loyalty to a ruler is perpetually in need of enforcement as it relies on reciprocal benefits, making it vulnerable and temporal. The noble friendship, on the other hand, built through common experiences and mutual respect between two people of equal status, as well as through reciprocal gifts and favours, becomes as strong as a blood tie. Exchanging gifts or favours is intended to nurture, develop, and maintain both kinds of friendship. Yet it must be balanced and not overdone, as *Odds þáttr* cautions, lest the gift-giving gesture become a disservice harming the recipient, as was the case of Oddr's horses sent to his friend Þorsteinn, which almost caused his death.

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28 Hill, "Friendship in the Middle Ages," 566.

29 Hill, "Friendship in the Middle Ages," 568.

30 Guðrún Nordal, *Ethics and Action*, 28.

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